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ABSTRACT

In 1994, the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund made a commitment to school-age care by launching the MOST Initiative--a $6.5 million, multi-year project aimed at systemic community-based change to improve the quality and availability of out-of-school time for children in three cities: Boston, Chicago, and Seattle. The MOST Initiative was designed in partnership with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) (formerly the School-Age Child Care Project) at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. The initiative recognized the importance of technology as a tool for: (1) facilitating communication within the collaboration and (2) disseminating information on both local levels (to parents, children, and community programs) and on national levels (to government agencies, media, policy makers, and advocacy organizations). This paper presents a case study of the various ways that technology has been used by the MOST Initiative. The paper discusses details that show how NIOST and the three MOST cities increasingly used technology to implement their action plans and offers suggestions on how other communities can use technology to develop similar networks that support out-of-school activities. The paper's appendices contain a listing of national technology resources relevant to the issue of children's out-of-school time and descriptions of the three MOST Web sites. (LPP)

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Making the MOST of Out-of-School Time:
Technology's Role in Collaboration

Lillian Coltin & Kate McGuire ■

Abstract

In 1994, the DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund made an unprecedented commitment to school-age care by launching the MOST Initiative—a $6.5 million, multi-year project aimed at systemic community-based change to improve the quality and availability of out-of-school time for children in three cities: Boston, Chicago, and Seattle. The MOST Initiative, designed in partnership with the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) (formerly the School-Age Child Care Project) at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, recognized the importance of technology as a tool for (1) facilitating communication within the collaboration and (2) disseminating information on both local levels (to parents, children, and community programs) and on national levels (to government agencies, media, policy makers, and advocacy organizations). This paper presents a case study of the various ways that technology has been used by the MOST Initiative. It discusses details that show how NIOST and the three MOST cities increasingly used technology to implement their action plans and offers suggestions on how other communities can use technology to develop similar networks that support out-of-school activities. The paper also includes a listing of national technology resources relevant to the issue of children's out-of-school time.

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Introduction

Children and youth today cope with a far more complex and challenging world than did previous generations. With schools open for less than 20% of a child's waking hours, and family structures moving toward dual-career and single-parent or blended households, the need for safe, high-quality programming during out-of-school time is paramount, and growing (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1994; National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 1996). Although changes in welfare legislation mandate increased work force participation by parents, unfortunately the legislation does not provide help in finding or paying for care for children over 6 years old. The existing gap between the supply and demand for school-age care services will continue to increase. The U.S. General Accounting Office announced that "assuming no significant expansion in available day care slots, supply for school-aged kids will meet only 40% of demand by 2002. It is expected to be particularly hard to find slots for older elementary school children" ("National Update," 1997, p. 8). Research indicates that how children aged 5–14 spend their nonschool hours has a critical impact on school achievement, emotional and behavioral development, and long-term success (Miller, 1995; Miller et al., 1990). Yet what we provide as a nation fails to meet the needs of children—school doors are closed after 3:00 p.m., recreation programs don't match families' work schedules, and caring adults are busy working, commuting, or attending to the needs of young children or elderly family members. Even when after-school programs exist, limited resources hamper accessibility, affordability, and, ultimately, the quality of care offered (Seligson, 1997; Seligson & Allenson, 1993).

The Launch of the MOST Initiative

> *The current out-of-school time "system" includes many individuals and organizations that must work together to ensure youth have someplace to go when they are not in school. It is an interconnected system that includes everything from funding for programs, to*

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> *transportation to and from activities, to education to develop professional staff for programs. If any of the system's many parts are weak, the availability and quality of out-of-school programs may be compromised.* (Seattle MOST, 1996)

The MOST Initiative represents a community-based, collaborative model for improving the accessibility and quality of care for children in their out-of-school time. This model attempts to facilitate change on multiple levels. On the national level, MOST cities have worked to increase public awareness of the need for out-of-school care and to develop college-level academic programs for the professional development of staff, and they have participated in a national accreditation pilot focused on program improvement. On a local level, MOST cities have worked to increase the number of children served by before- and after-school programs, improve the quantity and quality of programs, raise the amount and quality of in-service training received by program staff, and help provide accessible information to members of the school-age care field.

In May 1995, after 1 year of planning, Boston, Chicago, and Seattle received grants of up to $1.2 million for the implementation of their 3-year action plans. Each city was required to raise local financial support that matched or exceeded the funding awarded for each of the grant years. The size of the DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund's support decreases each year, and the size of the local match must increase. This funding approach is intended to motivate a long-term local commitment to support a system of school-age care that meets the needs of the community.

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) staff work closely with each community to provide technical assistance and comprehensive training support. In addition, NIOST facilitates communication between the cities, and with national organizations at conferences, annual retreats, consultations, and training sessions throughout the country for a wide range of audiences. The DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund has hired an independent research organization, the Chapin Hall Center for Children, to conduct a multi-year evaluation of the MOST Initiative.

Technology and the MOST Initiative

While MOST is not a technology initiative, two primary tasks for both NIOST and the cities are collaboration and information sharing, both internally and with national audiences and organizations. During the design stage of the MOST Initiative, it became obvious that advancing the computer skills and enhancing the equipment of the collaborators would dramatically increase their ability to share information with each other and with local and national communities.

Within the MOST Initiative, communication is now frequent and detailed, as the cities, NIOST, the funders, and the evaluators become increasingly comfortable with e-mail, listservs, and electronic bulletin boards. All collaborators now have home pages on the World Wide Web. These Web sites facilitate information sharing between groups and represent a powerful tool for the dissemination of research, events, and other resources to people and communities across the country who struggle with the same issues. Locally, each of the three cities will develop databases of information about out-of-school time activities in their communities. Nationally, NIOST has collaborated with the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) to establish SAC-L, an online discussion listserv available to all members of the school-age care field. This forum allows NIOST to share what the MOST cities have learned and to learn about projects and approaches in other communities.

Although it is crucial that children and program staff have access to computers so technology can become a part of program curriculums, this access has not been the focus of technology improvements within the MOST Initiative. Rather, technology is viewed as contributing to the MOST Initiative's goal of building community systems that will support and improve children's access to high-quality out-of-school programs. While it is hoped that other organizations within these community systems will take up the challenge of increasing computer access and knowledge at the program level, MOST focuses its work on developing the use of technology as a tool that can advance the communication, efficiency, and information sharing of collaborating partners. MOST also hopes to facilitate the provision of timely and accurate information on topics ranging from program location and activity content to standards of care and available staff training, so that large numbers of people and

organizations both locally and nationally are kept informed about the issues of out-of-school time.

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) and Technology

In June 1994, staff at NIOST set in motion several technology activities to build a structure that would support the three MOST cities as they worked to implement their technology goals. A part-time technology specialist was hired to assess the needs of the MOST Initiative. The results of the internal needs assessment found that at NIOST, and in the cities, there existed:

- a severe shortage of hardware: the computers and modems needed updating, and the staff needed to be connected to the Internet;
- limited technology expertise: many staff were uncomfortable with computers and had little training.

During the planning year, the technology specialist at NIOST explored currently existing computer networks, hardware and software options, distance learning techniques, and emerging trends in the information technology field. Recommendations, specifications, and telephone support were shared with the cities. Each city used this information as they developed the sections of their action plan, which discussed goals for the uses of technology. The cities were required to meet basic communication standards, including:

- network hook-up and basic Internet training for the site coordinator in each MOST city,
- e-mail correspondence between NIOST site liaisons and city coordinators, and
- frequent review of appropriate electronic bulletin board(s).

Suggestions for additional city-specific uses of technology included the following items:

- training for collaborators and program directors through satellite and cable conferences;
- local conference sessions on the uses of advanced technology;
- e-mail communication with families, schools, colleges, funders, regulators, and policy makers;
- periodic updates of needs assessment and supply survey;
- computer training/laboratories in a school-age degree or certificate program; and
- computer assisted in-service training.

By May 1996, the technology specialist reported that at NIOST:

- computers had been converted to high-speed networking, allowing easier logins and the use of sophisticated Web browsers (Netscape);
- valuable information was being provided to the field via the NIOST Web site;
- the staff at NIOST had increased their computer expertise, now relying on e-mail, listservs, and bulletin boards for communication internally with MOST collaborators and with the school-age care field;
- conference calls among all three cities in which technology issues were discussed had facilitated cross-site communication while increasing people's knowledge of technological options;
- MOST-L (a mailserv) was developed specifically for cross-city communication allowing members of the MOST Initiative to send messages to the list, which would then distribute them to all of the people subscribed;
- NIOST frequently posts information on HandsNet, which links over 5,000 public interest and human service organizations across the nation; and
- NIOST and ERIC's establishment of SAC-L provides a national discussion list through which the MOST cities, other organizations, and SAC practitioners can pose questions, receive feedback, and share information across the country.

When the part-time technology specialist left NIOST, it soon became apparent that without a staff person dedicated to advancing technology, these goals lost their priority status. There was no one person to champion the need to move forward. As a result, the Web site stagnated, and other activities identified by the senior technology specialist remain unaddressed.

During the summer of 1997, NIOST did a much-needed revision of their Web page by developing a structure that is increasingly user friendly and that allows more information to be posted.

SAC-L has grown to over 200 members nationally, and feedback from list subscribers about content has been positive. Recently, one person started her request to list members as follows: "I appreciate so much of the information shared here. I feel like I've made friends and colleagues although most of you I have never met face-to-face." Information exchanged on SAC-L has included public policy and funding issues, staff compensation and retention, homework's place in an after-school program, transportation strategies, and program administrative issues. SAC-L has become a place for practitioners to continue conversations started at state and national conferences. NIOST works to build public awareness about SAC-L by including flyers in all information packets mailed to the public and has demonstrated its ease of use and value at workshops and other training sessions.

There are, however, technology goals that were recommended by the technology specialist that have not yet been realized by NIOST, such as:

- developing and posting an online publications order form,
- setting-up a chat line for SAC professionals to "talk" live via the computer, and
- coordinating an online database of NIOST's extensive library of printed materials on topics related to the issue of out-of-school time.

The focus of the National Institute on Out-of-School Time has been to build the technological infrastructure for the field of school-age care on the national level and to develop collaborators' skills and use of technology within the three MOST cities. Through reviewing the experiences of each city, it becomes apparent that several factors directly affect the ability of a city to reach its goals for using technology as a means of collaboration and a tool for disseminating information. The two primary factors to success seem to be (1) the help and expertise of a technology specialist and (2) the levels of computer access and literacy within both the collaborating organizations and the broader community. While the national goals of the MOST Initiative are the same for all three cities, the focus and progress in each city reflect their target population, priorities, and local collaborators, combined with community assets and barriers.

Boston MOST

Community Profile

Among Boston's 574,283 residents, only 9% are between the ages of 5 and 13. However, 38% of those attending Boston schools are members of families receiving welfare, and 64% qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The poorest communities in the city—Dorchester, Mattapan, and Roxbury—have the least access to technology through either home personal computers, public libraries, or schools. These communities have the largest numbers of school-age children and school-age programs in the city, as well as the highest unmet demand for school-age programming.

Primary Lesson

Boston MOST is now in its third year of implementation and is beginning to work to increase the use of technology to improve communication within their community collaboration and to disseminate information to parents, children, and providers in Boston. Any organization that attempts to address problems through community building and collaboration must understand both its own strengths and resources in the context of the abilities, needs, and assets of the community in which its members work. During the first 2 years, community stakeholders saw improvements in the quantity and quality of school-age care as much higher priorities than advancing technological resources. As a result, Boston MOST did not believe it appropriate to put an expensive and time-intensive item such as technology at the top of their agenda.

Accomplishments

From the beginning, Boston MOST worked to increase the use of technology by initiating an internal upgrade of equipment and development of staff skills, allowing for the use of e-mail to communicate with local collaborators, the other MOST cities, and NIOST. Because technological advancements were not one of their priorities, they did not use funding to hire a technology specialist.

Boston MOST has expended a lot of time and energy pursuing potential collaborations. Staff explored possible technology partnerships with boston.com (the electronic publishing arm of the *Boston Globe*) and the Boston Public Library. Together with a long list of community partners, NIOST, and the other two MOST cities, they applied for a Telecommunications and Information

Infrastructure Assistance Program (TIIAP) grant, which they were not awarded. Finding school-age information on the Web did not seem to be high on the list of priorities for either low- or moderate-income parents, or for resource-strapped service providers. The concrete needs for increased program availability, financing, and quality improvements took precedence over the expansion of a medium that not all of the community collaborators had agreed was worth the investment.

By the end of their second year as a MOST city, Boston staff shifted their ideas about technology. Their knowledge of computer systems and capabilities had improved, as had the knowledge of their community collaborators. Computers were increasingly accessible at public libraries and schools—to parents, children, and providers. Providers at directors' meetings began to express interest in having information available electronically. It was at this point in year 3 that Boston MOST began posing strategic questions such as, "How can we use technology to support our primary objectives around supply, quality, access, and organizational development?" Community stakeholders now view technology as a valuable tool that can facilitate the improvement of services to children.

Goals for Year 3

The Boston MOST staff is attending presentations and demonstrations by community organizations that work with nonprofit organizations to increase the use of technology in affordable ways. For example, one company has software available to upgrade the older, donated equipment that nonprofit organizations many times struggle to use effectively. An AmeriCorps member will provide part-time assistance to Boston MOST staff as they work to build a system of communication and information sharing. They hope that this AmeriCorps member will take on the roles of researcher, explorer, host, cheerleader, matchmaker, advocate, expert, and broker to support the broader use of technology by many more community members.

To assess the technological needs and interests of the community, Boston MOST has distributed a survey to program providers in order to acquire accurate information about their current technology capabilities, program interests, and financial abilities to acquire and maintain hardware. Boston MOST will use this information when they develop plans to distribute grants to local SAC projects. They may decide to require that programs, as part of the grant terms, increase the use of technology and the computer literacy of their staff.

Boston MOST also hopes to expand their use of technology by collaborating with other organizations interested in advancing this project. For years, they have had a printed directory of service providers within the school-age care field. One possibility is partnering with Inner City Access, which has an outline of a Web site on the Internet but no content. Boston MOST is offering the information from its printed directory of before- and after-school programs for posting on the Web page (Parents United for Child Care, 1997).

Chicago MOST

Community Profile

According to the 1990 census, Chicago had a population of 2,783,726. Of these residents, 40% were African-American, 38% Caucasian, 20% Latino, and 3% Asian. One-fifth of all households reported annual incomes of less than $10,000. Of all Chicago children between the ages of 5 and 11, 29% lived in households whose incomes were below the poverty level. Only 28% of households in Chicago have personal computers. Of those households with computers, 14% have modems, which are necessary for Internet access. A 1997 survey of the 472 member organizations of Chicago MOST, Chicago Youth Agency Partnership, and Children and Youth 2000 found that 64% of the 94 organizations responding have computers that are "Internet compatible," and 14% of the respondents have Web sites. The survey found that currently only 21% of the organizations responding helped provide children, youth, and parents with access to computers. Interviews with public agencies such as the Chicago Park District, Chicago Housing Authority/HUD, Chicago public libraries, and the Chicago Police Department were encouraging. During the next few years, these public agencies will provide increasing Internet access to the public.

Primary Lesson

Chicago MOST's work on technology reinforces central components of the theory behind the MOST model. First, as was shown in Boston, community-based organizations must modify their goals in response to the skills, needs, and commitments of the community. In addition, Chicago MOST's work on technology strongly supports the belief that the

collaboration of community organizations substantially improves the quality of services provided. When these two components connect, a model develops in which progress is continuously evaluated and expanded based on the increased knowledge and resources that are pulled together through collaboration.

Accomplishments

The goal of Chicago MOST was to build the technology infrastructure from both the program level and the community level simultaneously. Chicago MOST surveyed local programs about their current computer software and hardware; their interest and ability to provide computer access to parents, kids, and community members; and their financial ability to participate in a technology advancement project. Based on the responses to these questionnaires, 29 computers were awarded to programs.

After giving serious attention to both the hopes and fears of staff, programs, and community leaders, Chicago MOST was able to enter into exploratory discussions with staff from two large youth-oriented collaboratives that shared an interest in expanding the use of technology. After a 6-month investigative phase funded by the Chicago Community Trust, Chicago MOST collaborated with the Chicago Youth Agency Partnership and Children and Youth 2000 to develop a database (KINFO—information for kids and their kin) designed to address the information needs of Chicago based on available resources. These collaborative partners are currently seeking funding (including a TIIAP grant) to implement their design (Chicago Youth Agency Partnership et al., 1997).

Chicago MOST and their collaborators have developed a database that not only provides access to information relevant to the school-age care field but also links youth, their parents, and providers to resources on all aspects of out-of-school time such as jobs, continuing education options, mental and physical health, politics, and emergency service providers. KINFO will contain information from 446 Chicago-based organizations including centers for children and youth, universities and colleges, health care providers, advocacy organizations, religious organizations, corporations, and government agencies. In addition to providing local information about Chicago, KINFO will offer links to regional and national databases relevant to children and youth. KINFO demonstrates the type of collaboration and matching funding resources needed for sustainability of the MOST Initiative.

It is anticipated that this online database will receive widespread direct use by parents, youth, and professionals as access to computers increases in public schools, public libraries (plans call for all Chicago libraries to be online by the end of 1997), park district programs, and homes. Other locations for access are also being explored, such as day care centers, corporations, and building lobby directories.

Goals for Year 3

The Chicago MOST Web site has received little maintenance since it was created in 1995. Currently, the staff is working with Metro Chicago Information Center to enhance their Web site design, provide quality control of content, and offer training on updating site information. As soon as KINFO is operational, they will establish a link from the Chicago MOST Web site to the KINFO database.

Once adequate funding is secured for KINFO, their 2-year implementation phase will begin. Tasks include developing an infrastructure, gathering site content, creating and finalizing the design, piloting the site in two neighborhoods, advocating for increased public and private access to the Internet, identifying and cultivating stakeholders and developing funding streams, evaluating the pilot start-up, launching and marketing KINFO citywide, and, finally, maintaining the system by continuing to gather and create content and identify additional stakeholders and funders.

Barriers

While use of technology is expanding, several challenges remain in building a technology social infrastructure for the 77 neighborhoods of Chicago. Many out-of-school time programs do not have resources for technology. Some people see technology as a middle-class solution that will not serve the needs of their communities.

The accuracy and breadth of the database is contingent on the active support and participation of the multiple community organizations that have acted as resource or referral agencies. Some agencies are hesitant to collaborate with the creation of KINFO. There is a concern that the database will be competing with them in their role as information provider. However, KINFO can enhance the referrals these agencies provide to parents and make their services more valuable.

Seattle MOST

Community Profile

Seattle, with a population of 516,000, has over 12% of its residents living in poverty. The poverty rate among children and youth ages 6–17 is almost 16%. Less than 50% of all Seattle public school children have access to computers. Of those who have no access, nearly all come from low-income families. Providers of care to school-age children also have a high degree of computer illiteracy.

Primary Lesson

Seattle MOST hired a part-time technical specialist to research, promote, and coordinate their technology improvement efforts. The technology specialist also works part-time with SafeFutures, an initiative devoted to helping at-risk youth. His computer skills, combined with his experience providing technical support to community-based organizations, generated essential leadership and support that allowed Seattle MOST's technology plans to become reality.

Seattle MOST's initial action plan had a well-thought-out technology component. The main goal was to help parents and youth find and choose out-of-school programs and activities by developing an online database. Their agenda was thorough and specific to the needs of the city, including plans to work with language or cultural specific organizations to determine the most-effective way to gather and disseminate information and time to research computer networks and telephone "info line" services. The action plan that Seattle developed identified not only the primary information that the database would contain but also the target audiences of the database, the organization responsible for its research and development, possible collaborators within the community, their hopes and expectations around outcomes, and the estimated cost.

Accomplishments

Seattle now maintains up-to-date information on over 300 programs with over 11,000 slots and promotes the database through community events, the news media, and flyers. The database is available free of charge at 88 community access points throughout Seattle. Locations include all Seattle public libraries, Center for Career Alternatives, El Centro de la Raza, Operational Emergency Center, and numerous family, youth, and ethnic centers. During 1996, there were over 2,000 visits to the database and well over 10,000 visits to all of Seattle MOST's Web sites and documents. In addition, they sought and received a $35,700 in-kind cash donation towards large-scale publication of free *Neighborhood Guides to Activities for School-Age Children and Youth in Seattle* (based on the database), which have been printed and distributed throughout Seattle (Klein, 1997). Because of their accessibility, the database and Web sites have been important promotional tools for generating public awareness about the need for school-age activities.

To build capacity, Seattle MOST (along with NIOST and the other two MOST cities) sought funding from TIIAP in 1996, which they did not receive. But Seattle MOST recognized that increasing the computer access and skills of parents, children, and providers requires a collaboration of resources and information. They developed partnerships with Sound Connections—a project that gives personal computer hardware, Internet software and access, and training to nonprofit groups; with SafeFutures—a community effort to improve services for at-risk children, which has a human services database component that has complemented the efforts of Seattle MOST; and with Child Care Resources, who have a database of licensed child care providers.

The Seattle MOST "Find and Choose" Database has yielded some unexpected benefits. It has been used by support center staff to print customized lists of providers, by school-age care workers looking for places to work, and by providers looking for curriculum ideas. It has also provided preliminary statistics on slot availability, center capacity, and diversity within the school-age care system. Some secondary accomplishments include the online publication of a *Parent Resource Directory*, the *Young People's Pages* with youth views on out-of-school time, the *Youth Yellow Pages* (a resource guide by and for young people), a resource list for local school-age care providers, home pages designed for six school-age care programs, and the creation of an online database of licensed child care centers for Child Care Resources, the child care resource and referral agency that serves Seattle.

Goals for Year 3

The next step for Seattle MOST will be to make information more widely available to lower-income

families and ethnic minority communities through (1) the production and distribution of tens of thousands of printed *Neighborhood Guides* and (2) efforts to increase access to computers.

Today, all Seattle public libraries and public schools have some Internet access. Computer labs are sprouting up at many organizations and in low-income housing units. The Sound Connections project is pursuing funding for their well-developed plan to give 140 human service agencies Internet and e-mail access. SafeFutures staff will also help address this issue by assisting key agencies in gaining access to e-mail and the Internet.

The *SafeFutures Report on Electronic Access to Family Resource Information* (Klein, 1996) describes the pros and cons of the several community databases in Seattle. In this paper, Phil A. Klein, the technology specialist for Seattle MOST, discusses the issues that arose during the process of developing these databases and how they were resolved. He gives particular attention to issues of collaboration, resource maximization, and the integration of multiple information sources. This paper provides an in-depth look at one city's approach to technological developments.

Barriers

The factors impeding implementation of the database in Seattle included difficulty spreading the word through institutions such as the schools, a lack of pre-existing public awareness and demand for school-age activity information, and the limited access of both parents and providers to computers, combined with computer illiteracy. Patience and community networking helped overcome the first barriers. Wider distribution of information in print format represents an intermediate solution for sharing information until broader community efforts can increase computer literacy by improving the availability of computers and training.

Collaboration and Information Sharing as Only Two Steps among Many

The overall goal of the MOST Initiative is to improve the quantity and quality of opportunities that low-income children in the three cities have during their out-of-school time. Technology can enhance their lives by improving communication among community members, including policy makers and local funders, concerned with children's out-of-school time and by providing better access to comprehensive information about the availability of high-quality programs in their community. NIOST knows from the SAC-L electronic discussion list, and from a review of national technology initiatives (see Appendix A), that a growing number of individuals and organizations concerned with out-of-school time are on the Internet. Expanding this base both nationally and locally will enhance the work of the MOST Initiative and increase the likelihood that others have the information they need to support out-of-school time in their communities.

The primary difficulty with an Internet-based resource is that many potential users still lack access to, and knowledge of, networked computers. These deficiencies are due largely to the cost of purchasing and maintaining computers. The MOST Initiative recognizes the extent that technology issues disproportionately affect low-income families who critically need access to resources and information to help keep their children safe and occupied in fruitful ways during their out-of-school time. Vast inequity exists between high- and low-income families with respect to computer access (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1995). *Advanced Telecommunications in U.S. Public Schools, K–12* (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1995) showed that only 21% of schools with large proportions of students from poor families have access to the Internet, compared with 62% of schools with relatively few poor students. Two-thirds of families who are wealthy have personal computers compared to only 42% of families with incomes under $30,000. This discrepancy contributes to further economic inequity because low-income and minority individuals are not able to develop the technical skills that are increasingly important prerequisites for succeeding in today's workforce. Unfortunately, school-age care providers are often faced with the same monetary restrictions as the low-income families that they serve.

Access to technology can help to overcome the isolation built into the school-age care profession by creating a "virtual community" for providers who seldom have the opportunity to network in person. Information sharing via the Internet can not only facilitate professional development but can also help staff provide resources and suggestions to families, children, and youth. Most importantly, all children need to have access to computers so they can develop the skills that they will need to successfully participate in the work force of the 21st century.

Recommendations Based on the Experiences of MOST

From their own experiences and those in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle, NIOST has developed a few tips and suggestions to assist other cities and organizations as they consider using technology to improve their community's access to information about the issue of out-of-school time. These recommendations revolve around five central themes: leadership, collaboration, content, technological literacy, and technology infrastructure.

Leadership

The collaboration needs to involve a technology-savvy person who can research, develop, and sustain advances in the use of technology within both the specific community and the SAC field. This technology specialist will need to work with all the partners on many levels and fronts simultaneously in order to build a compatible vision and a realistic plan of action.

Recommendations to address the issue of leadership include the following:

- Community initiatives need to remain open and receptive to the possibilities technology can offer. Including a technology component in an initial plan will ensure that technology becomes a supporting strategy for the entire agenda.
- Hire a community technology coordinator who will convene a task force to conduct a needs assessment, develop an action plan, seek out collaborating partners, and apply for the funding necessary to implement improvements.

Collaboration

Increasing the use of technology requires substantial needs assessment, planning, financial backing, implementation, and ongoing support. The percentage of agencies and organizations that agree to post information on the Web, and encourage their staff and members to get training, directly influences the extent that technology will improve communication and information sharing.

Recommendations to address the issue of collaboration include the following:

- Build partnerships in order to increase resources. For example, many after-school programs are located in school buildings. As schools and after-school programs develop technology resources and capacities, both groups can expand curriculums to include computer-supported activities. They can also work together to increase and improve the sharing of information relevant to children's lives via the Internet.
- Collaborate with other city, state, and national technology initiatives. Not only will the goals of the technology project be advanced, but the development of partnerships among these organizations could become a building block for successful collaborations aimed at addressing many other issues faced by school-age children and their families.
- Look closely at whom you are trying to reach via the Internet. Build relationships with agencies outside the school-age field whose staff serve families and children in need of information on out-of-school time.
- National organizations need to continue to support and advise other national and local organizations in their use of technology to move high-quality information online. For example, staff from the MOST cities and NIOST are members of a National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA) committee to advise on the design of a national technology network to support NSACA membership and the national accreditation system.

Content

The Internet is only as useful as the information that it contains. Agencies must work to post and update information, using Web site and database designs that are user friendly.

Recommendations to address the issue of content include the following:

- To address the gap in the availability of information related to school-age care, national organizations such as NIOST and NSACA need to continue to seek funding to support dissemination of high-quality information about the issue of out-of-school time and to spotlight "best practices."
- On a city level, work closely with the local child care resource and referral agency. An Internet self-accessed database is not a substitute for child care resource and referral information, and it is certainly not the same as a detailed

conversation one-to-one with a parent counselor. An Internet database may in fact increase telephone calls to the child care resource and referral agency for additional information about school-age care.

- Develop program-training materials that school-age care professionals and family day care providers can easily access through the Internet or via other technology such as distance learning.
- Build in feedback mechanisms to ensure that electronically available resources meet community needs.
- Establish guidelines to ensure high-quality content of electronic sites and monitor links to other sites.
- Promote subscriptions to local and national listservs and discussion groups (for example, SAC-L), which help create a "virtual community of practitioners."

Technological Literacy

The ability to use computers and other technology to improve learning, productivity, and performance is becoming a skill as fundamental to a person's ability to obtain a good job as traditional skills like reading, writing, and arithmetic. Technological literacy is a recurring theme of President Clinton's education plan: Right up there with every 8-year-old being able to read is the President's goal that "every 12-year-old must be able to log onto the Internet" ("A New Nonpartisan Commitment," 1997).

Recommendations to address the issue of technological literacy include the following:

- Encourage program staff, families, children, and youth to build computer literacy. Many libraries, adult education, and community centers can provide training and resources. More and more school-age and youth conferences offer workshops on using the Internet.
- Be sensitive to individual differences that affect a person's relationship to technology, especially gender, age, and cultural differences.
- Build into Requests for Proposals (RFPs) a provision that requires grantees to increase their internal uses of technology and disseminate project results and learnings via the Internet.
- Promote the use of the Internet. Include e-mail and Web site addresses on all printed materials: business cards, flyers, printed directories, FAX sheets, and stationery.
- Encourage increased program staff literacy by promoting the idea that high-quality out-of-school programs address the information skills that children will needed to function in the workplace and community of the 21st century.

Technology Infrastructure

Hardware, compatible software, access locations, and a systems management plan need to be in place for individuals and organizations to use technology effectively and efficiently.

Recommendations to address the issue of technology infrastructure include the following:

- Make information resources easily accessible to the whole community. Seek out schools, libraries, and community centers as access points and as collaborators in providing information, funding, and technical skills. For example, one partner may have the capability to establish a Web site, while others can provide content.
- Encourage staff training and technical assistance to ensure that resources are fully used and adequately maintained.
- Sell the cost benefits of technology to funders and end users; for example: e-mail can cost less than a telephone call, can avoid telephone tag and time-zone differences, and can distribute information quickly to a wide range of people.
- Use student interns, local service learning volunteers, or AmeriCorps members to input and maintain databases, to update Web sites, and to support program staff.

Closing Thoughts

If technology is integrated into the planning process, it can prove to be a powerful strategy in supporting the overarching goals of a project focused on improving the quantity and quality of out-of-school programming for low-income children and families in urban communities. It is important to remember that technology is not an isolated component of building a system of out-of-school care. Rather, technology needs to be woven into all aspects of the project. Not only can technology facilitate the dissemination of printed material, it can

also contribute to many nontechnical advances of the project such as building collaborations, attracting media attention to the issue, and supporting professional development efforts. The MOST Initiative has only begun to provide a glimpse of the possibilities that technology can play in the lives of children, families, staff, and communities.

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APPENDIX A

Technology Initiatives Addressing the Issue of Out-of-School Time

1. National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA)

The North Carolina School-Age Care Coalition is leading the nation in the first pilot of a statewide system for school-age care accreditation. The system will be based on the National Improvement and Accreditation System (NIAS), developed by the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA) and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) (formerly the School-Age Child Care Project) at Wellesley College. This pilot project is funded by a grant from the American Business Collaboration for Quality Dependent Care.

In addition to promoting community awareness about accreditation, the project will recruit and train endorsers and ASQ Advisors and provide First Steps Training for programs. (ASQ is a self-study

process: *Advancing School-Age Child Care Quality.*) The North Carolina School-Age Care Coalition will also have a database that can be used to track inquiries about accreditation, responses to individual inquiries, and dissemination of materials. Through Internet access and a home page, school-age programs can review information about the accreditation process, standards, and strategies for program development. The home page will include information of interest to parents, potential funders, and the public at large. In addition to accreditation information via computer, anyone in North Carolina will also be able to obtain accreditation information through a toll-free telephone number. *Contact: Linda Sisson, NSACA, 1137 Washington Street, Boston, MA 02124; tel.: 617-298-5012; e-mail: staff@nsaca.org; Web: www.nsaca.org*

2. The Early Childhood & School-Age Forum in the Children, Youth & Families area on HandsNet.

Founded in 1987, HandsNet links some 5,000 public interest and human service organizations across the United States. Network members include national clearinghouses and research centers, community-based service providers, foundations, government agencies, public policy advocates, legal services programs, and grassroots coalitions.

From the NIOST home page, you can click on HandsNet and visit HandsNet on the Web. HandsNet on the Web offers daily news from HandsNet on CONNECT: information about services, forums, and members; the latest *Action Alerts;* and *The Weekly Digest,* a sample from the hundreds of policy, program, and resource articles posted each week by HandsNet members. The information on HandsNet on the Web is currently available at no charge. In the future, HandsNet plans to offer memberships to an expanded service on the Web.

For a membership fee, you can join HandsNet on CONNECT, a full-featured network environment with interactive forums for human service organization to exchange information and resources and to collaborate on a broad range of program and policy issues.

NIOST is the information provider for the School-Age Folder on the Early Childhood & School-Age Forum. *Contact: Lillian Coltin at the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02181; e-mail: lcoltin@wellesley.edu. Web site: http://www.handsnet.org/handsnet/*

3. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (ERIC/EECE)

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education (ERIC/EECE) is one of 16 ERIC clearinghouses funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. ERIC clearinghouses identify and select documents and journal articles, and then prepare entries describing the documents and articles to be incorporated in the ERIC database, the world's most frequently used collection of information on education. Clearinghouses also publish digests, monographs, and other materials; answer questions; disseminate information on the Internet; and represent ERIC at conferences and workshops.

Located at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, ERIC/EECE contributes to the database in the areas of child development, the education and care of children from birth through early adolescence, the teaching of young children, and parenting and family life. The clearinghouse also operates several Internet-based discussion groups:

- CAMPUSCARE-L on campus children's centers
- ECENET-L on early childhood education
- ECPOLICY-L on early childhood policy issues
- MIDDLE-L on middle level education
- PARENTING-L on parenting issues
- PROJECTS-L on the Project Approach
- REGGIO-L on the Reggio Emilia (Italy) approach to early education
- SAC-L on school-age care

Web: http://ericeece.org

4. National Network for Child Care (NNCC)

The National Network for Child Care is part of the National Cooperative Extension System under the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Extension's National Network for Child Care is a group of professionals from across the country who have a vision of safe, caring, accessible child care for all children. NNCC is part of a larger Children, Youth, and Family Network consisting of National Networks for

Child Care, Science and Technology, Collaborations, Family Resiliency, and Health Decisions.

These networks are committed to improving the outcomes for limited resource families and at-risk children through collaborative efforts. The electronic and information service of these Networks is CYFERNET (Children, Youth, Family Education Resource Network). NNCC and CYFERNET can be reached at the following Web sites:

NNCC: http://www.exnet.iastate.edu/Pages/nncc/homepage.html

CYFERNET: http://www.cyfernet.org

5. National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC)

The National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC), an adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for Child Care, has been established to complement, enhance, and promote child care linkages, and to serve as a mechanism for supporting high-quality, comprehensive services for children and families. NCCIC activities include the dissemination of child care information, outreach to Administration for Children and Families (ACF) grantees, and publication of the *Child Care Bulletin*.

Technology is vital to improving services for children and families. Through the Internet, listservs, and audio-conferences, for example, NCCIC connects administrators, organizations, and parents on a regular basis to discuss child care issues. *Web: http://nccic.org*

6. The Center for Career Development in Early Care and Education at Wheelock College

The Center for Career Development in Early Care and Education at Wheelock College is devoted to improving the quality of early care and education for children by promoting the definition of early care and education as a professional field and a field of study. Through their technical assistance, research, and information about conferences, they are able to bring about change that meets the needs of families, children, and the child care field.

The Center offers week-long intensive seminars for child care professionals that focus on practical, up-to-date information that can be put to use immediately. The Advanced Seminars in Child Care Administration (including one on school-age care) administered in partnership with the Wheelock College Graduate School, offer exceptional opportunities for networking and sharing with other practitioners, administrators, and policy makers. For information about the Advanced Seminars in Child Care Administration, contact: *Advanced Seminars in Child Care Administration, The Center for Career Development in Early Care and Education, Wheelock College, 200 The Riverway, Boston, MA 02215; tel.: 617-738-5200 ext. 279; fax: 617-738-0643. Web site: http://ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/ccdece/ccdece.html*

Links

ECCAREER-L
(ECCAREER-L@postoffice.cso.uiuc.edu)

ECCAREER-L is a private electronic discussion list available only to members of the National Career Development Network for the Early Childhood and School-Age fields. ECCAREER-L provides a forum for Network members to discuss the progress and challenges of their work on early childhood and school-age career development issues, to ask questions of one another, to share successes, and to solve problems.

7. Concordia College

The Concordia College in St. Paul, Minnesota, provides a number of services and information via their Web page. They offer information about their workshops, access to their library catalog of school-age care materials, descriptions of their publications, and links to many other home pages that discuss issues surrounding school-age child care. One of the many features that Concordia College offers is the Studying by Distance Learning (BA or MA program), which allows people to earn their degrees without attending traditional on-campus classes through Internet communication, discussion groups, and video and audio tapes. *Web: http://www.csp.edu/Dept_Pages/sac/sac.html*

8. National Organizations with Web Sites

More and more organizations involved with the issue of children's out-of-school time maintain Web sites. A few home pages to visit include:

Stand for Children (http://www.stand.org). The Stand for Children demonstration in Washington, DC, on June 1, 1996, inspired over 133 rallies across the country on the Stand for Children Day; and 256 towns, counties, cities, and states signed proclamations supporting Stand for Children. The

organization's Web site allows you to obtain practical information on ways to help improve the quality of children's lives in your community and to talk to others around the country who are taking a stand for children.

National Assembly of National Voluntary Health and Social Welfare Organizations (http://www.nassembly.org/html/about.html). This site coordinates several forums including the National Collaboration for Youth (NCY).

National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care (http://nrc.uchsc.edu). This site has information on rules and regulations for child care centers in every state. You can also search for specific topics such as child–staff ratios in the "Frequently Asked Questions" section.

Search Institute (http://www.search-institute.org). The site builds on the Institute's national research and publications about children and adolescents. On this site, you will find information on developmental assets; information on Search Institute's Healthy Communities; information on various organizations and individuals committed to children, youth, and families; and back issues of the Institute's newsletters.

APPENDIX B

MOST Web Sites

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) Web Site
(http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW/SAC)

The NIOST home page has recently been updated. With new graphics, backgrounds, buttons, and a wealth of information, the pages are a comprehensive source for information on school-age care (SAC) and out-of-school time. The NIOST Web pages include descriptions of MOST (and links to the three cities as well as DeWitt Wallace–Reader's Digest Fund and Chapin Hall Center for Children), and other projects and initiatives at NIOST. Visitors to the NIOST pages can access a growing list of links and a library of online information including fact sheets on school-age children and welfare reform. A calendar of upcoming SAC events and announcements of news in the SAC field are also on the site.

Boston MOST Web Site
(http://www.wellesley.edu/WCW/CRW/SAC/most-bos.html)

The current Boston MOST home page includes a description of MOST-Boston, a link to the Boston Public Library, and phone numbers for Parents United for Child Care (PUCC).

Chicago MOST Web Site
(http://homepage.interaccess.com/~chgomost)

The Chicago MOST home page is currently "under construction" to update information and to correct links that do not work. There is a link to a 1991 book on *Parenting for an Age of Information: Preparing Your Daughter or Son for the Next Century* by Jamieson McKenzie. The Chicago MOST pages also include a mission statement, a directory of kid pages on the Internet (from March 96), and a directory of Chicago museums, libraries, and other resources (March 96). Their seminars and training page is under construction. There is a form to get on their mailing list and an e-mail link.

Seattle MOST Web Site
(http://www.pan.ci.seattle.wa.us/dhhs/most/index.html)

The Seattle MOST home page is beautiful and very extensive, yet up to date, user friendly, and well organized. It includes a short description of Seattle MOST, the searchable database of activities for children and youth in Seattle, and an extensive parent phone directory on many topics. There is information about MOST and Seattle MOST, links to child care resources, and a database of licensed child care centers in King County public schools. The page also has an online calendar of family events and activities; youth feedback on MOST (from summer, 1996); Seattle Youth Involvement Network; KidsWeb (World Wide Web digilibrary for school kids); SACC resources; and e-mail links to MOST-Seattle staff.

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